

Richard Wilson

The Times withholds rebuttal to a cruel lie

Washington.

A cruel deception is being perpetuated by heedless men to the effect that all President Nixon need do to secure the release of prisoners of war held in North Vietnam is to declare a specific date for the complete withdrawal of all American forces.

The depth of this deception is emphasized in a response to questions submitted to the Hanoi government by the New York Times, which the newspaper decided not to publish. The reasons leading to this decision are curious.

On page 10 of its January 21 edition under a headline saying "Hanoi's Cable to Times Cites Peace Aim," the Times gave this main reason for not publishing Hanoi's response to the questions submitted by its managing editor:

The response was no different than previous positions stated at the Paris peace negotiations by Hanoi's representatives and published at the time in the Times.

This excuse for not publishing Hanoi's response can be questioned for several reasons. First, the cable was an official statement direct from Hanoi and not filtered through the North Vietnamese delegation in Paris.

Second, the Times, in an interview earlier with the head of the Communist delegation, had spread the impression that releasing prisoners of war could be separated from other issues at the Paris conference.

And, third, the Hanoi response might have helped to clear the minds of those who cultivate the deception that the prisoner of war question can be separated from North Vietnam's insistence that all troops must be withdrawn, all support to the Thieu government cut off and the policy of Vietnamization abandoned.

The Times often has published, and makes a special point of publishing, important public documents.

itself in this case to publishing merely a summary of the exclusive statement it received from Hanoi, and did not relate this response to the questions it had asked except to say that none had been answered directly.

Nor, it was indicated, would the Times have done this much had it not been for the fact that the Foreign Broadcast Information Service of the Central Intelligence Agency had published in its weekly report the substance of the exchange in its regular function of monitoring Hanoi's public communications.

Furthermore, a good many readers would conclude that the Hanoi response confirmed beyond any shadow of doubt the Nixon administration's claim that North Vietnam has flatly turned down a prisoner release in exchange for a firm withdrawal date.

Senator George McGovern (D., S.D.), a candidate for president, has, in effect, called Mr. Nixon a liar for making that claim.

Aside from revealing the hazards of a newspaper trying to conduct, or at least influence, foreign affairs, the incident of this unpublished document from Hanoi nails down hard what the Communist government will settle for.

It will settle for the humiliation of the United States, complete renunciation of the Thieu government, and an end to all support for the elected government of South Vietnam. Then—maybe— it will release American prisoners of war.

The Times could have placed these facts in high relief by publishing its questions and Hanoi's cabled response, but it did not do so.

Senator McGovern and, more recently, Senator Mike Mansfield (D., Mont.), persist in the notion that it is all

complete withdrawal and Hanoi will interpret that as letting the Thieu government go down the drain and promptly release the prisoners. The war will then be over.

Hanoi's cable makes it a lot clearer: President Nixon must pull out of Vietnam totally stop backing the Nguyen Van Thieu bellicose clique and conform to all seven points of Hanoi's peace proposal, which would accomplish the complete humiliation of Mr. Nixon in his attempt to achieve a constructive end to the war.